

JESUS / ISA (A.S) AND THE UPLIFTMENT OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

Jumuah khutbah – 26 December 2014

Delivered by: Dr Sheikh Shaheed Mathee at the Ahlul Bait (a.s) Islamic Center, Ottery, Cape Town

First Khutbah

Almighty Allah says in the above mentioned verses in Surah Maryam Verses 20-21: “She (Maryam) said: ‘How shall I have a child seeing that no human being has ever touched me, nor have I been unchaste?’ He said: ‘So shall it be. Your Lord says ‘It is simple for Me’. And so We made him a sign for mankind and a Mercy from Us. And it is a matter (already) decided.”

Surah Maryam Verses 30 – 34 states: “He (Isa) said: ‘Indeed I am a servant of Allah. He has given me the Book and made me a Prophet. He has blessed me wherever I may be, and He has enjoined on me to (maintain) the Prayer, and to (pay) the zakat as long as I live, and to be good to my mother, and He has not made me self-willed and wretched. Peace is to me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised alive. That is Jesus, son of Mary.”

In Surah Aali-Imran Verse 45, Isa (a.s) is referred to as “distinguished in the World and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (to Allah).”

The birth of al-Nabī ʿĪsā – (a.s) of all Allah’s Prophets and Messengers is our heritage as Muslims. It belongs to us; in fact it gives us our sense of belonging; a belonging of and to ʿImān, of belief in Allah, al-Īmān al-wadīd al-raḥīm, and acceptance and acknowledgment of His Messengers. In the same way commemorating his attempted killing belongs to us, is our heritage, our treasure. It is perhaps instructive that this year Christmas, i.e. designated as the birth of ʿĪsā (a.s), comes just after the commemoration of ʿArbāʾn, in the greater ʿAshūrā. Allah in His ḥikmah chose not to let ʿĪsā (a.s) be killed; Allah in His Wisdom decreed that al-ʿĪsā (a.s) and his companions be killed (on another occasion we can discuss the significance of this contrast). But Christmas this year also falls within the time and environment of the mawlid of khayṭam al-ʿālamīn and Sayyid tamīm iddāh al-mursalīn, Allah’s Mercy to Al-ʿālamīn.

Therefore we must be aware of ʿĪsā’s (a.s) birth; we must uphold it. Yes, we share with our Christian brethren in creation their joy and happiness; from this mimbar I extend greetings and congratulations to Christians around the world, as they say in Arabic ʿĪdmānīd majīd, i.e. Merry Christmas. However essentially the birth of ʿĪsā (a.s) is our duty to uphold; in that way we remember Allah’s promise to us through ʿĪsā,

As highlighted in the verses quoted at the start of this khutbah “And so We made him a sign for mankind and a Mercy from Us. And it is a matter (already) decided.” As well as “And He (Allah) has blessed me (Isa) wherever I may be.”

But we also remember the covenant we made with Allah on the tongues of al-ʿawʿāriyyīn after their request when they said:

In Surah Ma-ida Verses 112 – 113 it states: “When the Disciples said: ‘O Jesus son of Mary, Can your Lord send down to us a table from the sky?’ He (Isa) said: ‘Be conscious of Allah, should you be faithful.’ They said: ‘We desire to eat from it, and our hearts will be at rest: we shall know that you had told us the truth, and we shall be among the witnesses to it.’”

Allah’s promise and our covenant we get from the numerous narratives of ʿĪsā (a.s) and his beautiful mother Maryam in the Qur’an.

The human condition, our lived reality must be foremost in our minds as we think of and uphold the birth of al-Nabī ʿĪsā (a.s) and celebrate and are happy. This man - and his sacred mother that woman - who loved humanity so deeply; who was a beacon of justice as he offered resistance to the Roman imperialist occupation but also the rigid law as appropriated and interpreted by the Jewish religious/political authority. ʿĪsā (a.s) said to us that we can only truly believe if and when we love all of humanity. ʿĪsā (a.s) offered resistance to all forms of injustice.

He heals on the Sabbath not because he wanted to essentially challenge the Hebrew social order causing the Sabbath to lose its social function, but because it was the human thing to do; it was an act of resistance against a rigid cruel reading of the law and against death of mostly the poor in the Jewish society of the time. He reminded the Rabbis that David and his comrades entered the House of God and ate the holy bread which was not lawful for him and his friends to do so, but only for the priests. The point is David was hungry and ate; he ??s? (a.s) cured a person on the Sabbath because that person was sick, was in pain; s/he needed a doctor and medication. The religious authority of course “pardoned” David only because he became King later; he was the political authority. And the political authority can usually act in a profane manner; their profanities are counted among the sacred. ??s? (a.s) was a barefooted preacher who had no army or temporal power.

Jesus was not, as Pope Benedict XVI says correctly, a liberal Rabbi or a forerunner of Christian liberalism. That is too superficial a reading of ??s? bin Maryam (a.s). He healed because we ought to celebrate and preserve life; for that matter, with the permission of Allah he restored life after death had set in. Thus we imagine, if a poor person died of hunger or lack of medication or because a Jewish physician could not according to the rigid law attend to her then by bringing that person back to life at the Mubarak hands of ?s? (a.s), Allah was reversing an injustice and establishing an act of supreme love and beauty. And thus quotes the words of Isa (a.s) in Surah Aali-Imran Verse 49:

“...And I heal the blind and the leper. And I revive the dead by Allah’s leave...”

??s?'s resistance had an artistic angle to it as the Qur??n tells us in the same verse referred to above:

“I (Isa) will create for you the form of a bird, then I will breath into it, and it will become a bird by Allah’s leave.”

But it was more than aesthetics; it was art that translated into life and movement. The bird, we can imagine, flew and soared vertically into the air, perhaps a metaphor for human upliftment. Why not, the person who created it was one of resistance against the difficulties and suffering of this world imposed by those who wield the sword and appropriated speaking in Allah’s name. He was prepared to be killed, crucified, thrown into a lion den, etc. Allah refused that he be killed and decreed that someone else is killed. How many true servants of Allah want to die in sincere worship to Allah and in service of humanity? But the final decree lies with Allah.

The Messenger of Allah (sawa) is reported to have said: “O Umm Ayman, do you not (or did you) know that my brother Isa never kept over [what he had for] supper until the next day’s

breakfast/lunch nor [what he had for] lunch until supper (meaning his meals were always meagre). He used to eat from the leaves of trees and nourished himself on rain water; he wore stitched clothing and retired to bed wherever he found himself at night (even in the open air). And he used to say, “every [new] day comes with its rizq.”

Said Al? (a.s) to his son, Al-?asan (a.s): “Do not blame (or hold in contempt) a person [suffering in poverty] seeking his/her daily sustenance [by any means]; whoever does not find his daily sustenance is given to abundant erring and errors. O my son, the [materially] poor person is despised and never listened to; his/her stature [as a human being] is not acknowledged. When the poor person is truthful [in his speech] they call him a liar; when s/he is humble (ascetic), they regard him an ignoramus. Whoever has been afflicted (tested) with poverty has been afflicted with four traits: weakness in his conviction, defect in his intellect, frailty in his religion, and absence of modesty [from others] in his presence (others do not respect him). We seek the protection of Allah from poverty.”

So the disciples made their request nevertheless. They did so with respect and reverence for the teacher that they want to eat, to taste. They were bespeaking a human need and reality. We may well imagine that al-hawariyin were of the low classes of the Hebrew community, the wretched of the earth, the poor and despised. The Qur’an tells us that it were therada’il, i.e. the scum and wretched of the earth who followed the ambiya (Prophets).

They were in all likelihood hungry; perhaps some of them did not eat for days. And if they had eaten, they wanted something different from scrap food of the poor, of the downtrodden. We can imagine that they wanted nice, nutritious and delicious food; their version of biryani and

caviar; ice cream and faluda. If Allah had given the Children of Isra'il under Musa manna and salwa, the food of the rich, surely He would do likewise now. The ma'idah (table spread) of Allah is nice; a three or five course meal we may well imagine.

Their request was not some exercise in testing God's ability; it was not engaging or toying with pure knowledge or religious gymnastics. They knew the story of another rebel, agitator who lived 1800 years earlier: Ibrahim (as) when he said:

"My Lord! Show me how You revive the dead. He (Allah) said: 'Do you not believe?' He (Ibrahim) said: 'Yes indeed, but in order that my heart may be at rest.'" (Surah Baqarah Verse 260).

Ibrahim needed to know. And therefore when he said to the despot king Nimrud, *rabbi alladhi yuhyi wa yumit*" (My Lord is He who gives life and brings death) he knew what he was talking about. He had experience.

Knowledge in Islam is not purely the product of thinking, the idea. It arises out of experience too; the experimental method has its place in Islam. Again as Marx says, the question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory, but is a practical question. The dispute over reality or non-reality of thinking isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.

Second khu?bah

Peshawar massacre – as a watershed: why Peshawar must not be our 9/11 (from an article by two Pakistani academics):

We shared the incredible sadness at the loss of life of so many innocent school children and staff in Peshawar. Our anger was primarily directed towards a state establishment that has nurtured the networks of patronage for these groups and individuals. And, we included our brothers and sisters in the Northwest as we feared for the lives of all our countrymen. That is why we are concerned that they would now be held collectively culpable, dehumanized, and targeted by our state and society. We should not have to restate the obvious here, but we say it nevertheless: the act of terrorism that killed these innocent school children and staff was reprehensible and indefensible. To attempt to defend it is to renounce one's humanity.

But there is also a bloodthirsty environment being created that is demanding war and more violence at any cost, palpable amidst the government's reinstatement of a death penalty, most recently used to convict children tortured into confessing to terrorism related crimes.

Commitment to justice makes imperative that we ask pertinent questions that many seem to have forgotten: How has a militarized policy in KPK, FATA, and Balochistan contributed to an escalation in civilian deaths? What is the quality of life for residents where continuous warfare does not bring peace but psychological trauma? Why does state/military apparatus support of militant groups in the past not compel individuals to resist the sound of present war drums? These are undoubtedly difficult questions to ask in an emotionally charged environment. But we have a responsibility to not only critically reflect and act, but also to ensure that the horrifying scenes witnessed last Tuesday do not continue under the guise of security, especially when historical trajectories of a neo-colonial state patriarchy propped up by strategic interests indicate that there is so much more at play. In the post-9/11 world, a militarized solution to the terrorism problem is an old script. And the parameters of the debate are kept deliberately constrained to the question: Should we seek vengeance or not? This completely absolves our rulers because it takes the debate into the realm of abstract moral philosophy rather than politics and political interests. The reality is that any state-military operation is not going to tackle the issue of terrorism. It will, on the other hand, strengthen the writ of a militarized state, and use the frenzy of the past week to prevent deeper questions being raised and analyses being offered.

We must remember everyone including those innocent victims brutally murdered in Peshawar, and those who face violence, displacement, starvation, and subjugation from Waziristan, to Balochistan, to all across the country.